

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, March 10, 2020.



Opinion

Another Wuhan could emerge as the coronavirus travels the world. Are politicians, including Donald Trump, prepared?

- The insights of quantum physics urge us to contemplate the unthinkable, and such out-of-the-box thinking is just what's needed to get the epidemic under control. We had better trust science, rather than politics, to lead us out of the crisis

Topic | Coronavirus outbreak



[Tom Plate](#)

Published: 3:13am, 10 Mar, 2020



(US President Donald Trump holds up a photo of the novel coronavirus during a tour of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, on Friday. Photo: Reuters)

How bad will the [global coronavirus epidemic \[1\]](#) get? The clichéd answer is: only the future will tell. But the problem is that the future is not only with us now but – to scramble the possibilities – it actually influences the past.

Astrophysicist and author John Gribbin, whose challenging new book *Six Impossible Things* helps mere mortals like me accept the crazed conceptualising of Godlike physicists, makes just this point. The implications may be profound.

Deep in the subatomic underworld of spectacularly tiny particles and waves is a measurable physical behaviour – especially wave behaviour – that, to me at least, is weird. It turns out that some waves carry their negative energy back into the past while some push it forward into the future.

In effect, this happens with no intermediary blocking the way (such as what we call the “present”). Gribbin explains: “The idea is that part of the quantum wave really can travel backwards through time ... in stark disagreement with our intuition that causes always precede the events that they cause.”

But where does the wave “travelling in reverse” come from? There is only one answer: the future. If so, then the future continually influences the past in the minutest degree of reality.

Think of time as a bustling two-way street. If the future influences the past, then we have been looking at the world upside down – or, rather, past to future. But reality is not this simple, which is why it is often nearly impossible to accept.

So we note, as does Gribbin, this exchange from Alice’s immortal adventures in Wonderland: “Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said. ‘One can’t believe impossible things.’ ‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast’.”

The great advantage of diving into neurotic but utterly science-based quantum physics is that it requires you to think outside the box. Physicists, notably in quantum theory, conceptualise aspects of the physical world, often with the help of thought experiments, that are hard to see or measure but are essential to understanding physical existence. The hitch is they often wind up taking us so far away from a comfortable “common sense” (or dogmatic) world view.



(Alice and the White Queen in Through the Looking-Glass. Source: Wikipedia)

In “real” life, for example, we think of time as moving in military formation, from past to present to future. But let us now assume there is no substantial now, because the very moment we observe or do something, it becomes the past; and, what’s more, that somehow or other the future affects the past in unexpected ways. Now let’s apply this idea to the coronavirus epidemic.

You may have noticed that US President Donald Trump and our scientists sometimes seem not to agree on rather basic aspects of the coronavirus epidemic.

As you know, Covid-19 simmers globally without the slightest humanitarian instinct and in a fiercely non-partisan way (there is no Republican, Democratic or Communist immunity from infection). And, for all anyone knows, the epidemic might not resolve itself quickly enough or, possibly, ever go away entirely. The future-soaked past is still revealing itself day by future day.

For the relatively brief time that the US has existed as a nation, its pragmatic penchant for problem-solving has helped it survive and prosper.

But as the philosophical pragmatist John Dewey once famously noted, “Acceptance of dogmatic rules as bases of conduct in education, morals and social matters, lessens the impetus to find out about the conditions which are involved in forming intelligent plans.”

Basic science cannot be beaten for that purpose. In the case of the coronavirus, we should add impossible thinking, if in fact the future does influence the past. Wuhan is an ongoing part of the past, but out there in the unseen future, feeding into new pasts, are very possibly other kinds of Wuhan.

We don’t know where they are, but we had better find them quickly. If you believe that globalisation will remain a big factor, as it has been up to now, a measure of “Wuhanisation” in many other places has to be assumed.

We cannot close down the world the way the Chinese creditably [closed down \[3\]](#) the metropolis of Wuhan. We still have no idea how much more trouble is out there. You might suspect, as I do, that the epidemic is historic and the belief that everything will be OK and work itself out is beyond optimism – maybe really nuts.

So this is the huge next new thing – but it is for the scientists, not the political leaders, to take over. The latter just don’t get it. It’s too hard for them. They will build their aircraft carriers and nuclear missiles, mindlessly, when it would be far smarter to pursue enhanced international security and peace.

The future has just now told us what is in the future: specks of little things that are coming in from the future to change the past that we thought we had more or less tamed. Our best bet is to keep thinking impossible things and figure that the future may be trying to change very many things.

Tom Plate is Loyola Marymount University’s Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Affairs and the Pacific Century Institute’s vice-president

Links

[1] <https://multimedia.scmp.com/infographics/news/china/article/3047038/wuhan-virus/index.html?src=article-launcher>

[2] <https://www.scmp.com/news/world/united-states-canada/article/3074123/defiant-trump-refuses-halt-his-rallies-coronavirus>

[3] <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3074151/are-china-style-lockdowns-answer-containing-coronavirus>